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ORIGIN OF THE SEMITIC ALPHABET.

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Writing was probably neither an invention nor a sudden discovery. In Egypt flourished the art of drawing, and in Egypt was spoken a language largely monosyllabic. In these two facts, alphabetic writing found a natural genesis. It was play and art to an Egyptian to draw outline figures of common objects. It was an act of simple intelligence to perceive that combinations of these pictures made phrases by the mere names of the objects pictured. The very children could read much without learning to spell. From the genius of the language it was natural to use the picture symbol of a syllable for a sign of its initial sound alone. Hence, at a very early time in Egypt, a limited number of picture characters had become commonly agreed on as signs of the various simple sounds, both consonants and vowels, and constituted a real and quite complete phonetic alphabet. This appears in innumerable inscriptions and records of all kinds.

Many of the hieroglyphics are mere outline figures. As the number of writers increased, the demand for haste, the lack of skill, the use of papyrus or waxed or powdered tablets and the pen and stylus, produced out of the hieroglyphs a set of broken and distorted outline forms, which constituted a new and now arbitrary alphabet. In the time of the Shepherd kings, this kind of writing, which is called hieratic, had lost much of its resemblance to the hieroglyphs out of which it was formed.

At some time, near the era of Abraham probably, a modification of the hieratic alphabet was adopted by some Semitic people, and by them imparted to the various tribes of Syria. Of this alphabet, in the first thousand years of its use, we have no specimen; and no one can tell what changes it may have undergone in that period. When this is considered, it is remarkable that the likeness of the Semitic alphabet to its Egyptian prototype is so distinct.

The most common Egyptian alphabet has been often published, sometimes by scholars like Lepsius, Champollion, Max Mueller and Brugsch, who aim only to exhibit the phonetic values, or to trace the likeness of the hieroglyphic, hieratic and later demotic alphabets; sometimes by scholars who aim to trace the descent of the Semitic from the Egyptian alphabet. For guides in both these aims we have some bilingual inscriptions, many Egyptian transcripts of Hebrew, Persian, Greek and Roman proper names, and a large vocabulary of Coptic words which are also old Egyptian.

But the descent of the Semitic alphabet from the Egyptian cannot be correctly traced without taking into account many considerations.

It must be noted that the phonetic systems of the Semitic and Egyptian languages were very different, and also that the Semitic languages have experienced very considerable phonetic changes. Both systems must be carefully explored before any satisfactory comparison can be instituted. A search for the original Semitic phonetic elements amid the changes which have taken place, such as the loss of the *p* sound, the softening of ג, the interchanging of the sibilants and dentals, etc., although involved in many difficulties, is not hopeless.

In addition to the usual methods of inquiry, the question must be raised whether the Semitic alphabet, in its mere arrangement, furnishes any indication of the quality of its letters in respect to aspiration, sibilation, softness, etc. Such a queston is not chimerical. The Semitic alphabet was not, like the Egyptian, spontaneous. It was all arbitrary, and some kind of reasonable plan of arrangement must have governed the adjuster. Moreover a selection was to be made out of sets of Egyptian letters of various degrees of aspiration, resonance, etc., and the adjuster exercised little more than ordinary intelligence if he recognized a sort of compulsion to select his letters in sets or classes.

A natural classification of Semitic phonetic elements would arrange together the resonant mutes בּ, גּ, דּ, their medial sounds ב, ג, ד, the roughly breathed mutes ו, ח, ט, the surd sounds פּ, כּ, תּ and then their new, smooth medial sounds, and lastly their old, roughly aspirated sounds פ, ק, ת. It is almost or quite natural to arrange these sets under each other in a square of three columns. But he who should do this, could scarcely fail to attempt to bring his remaining letters into the scope of the same classification. A column of the gutturals must be made, and it would be natural that it should lead the square. Since also א in Egyptian represented a vowel, and was to do so to some extent in Semitic letters, a full representation of the alphabet would require a second writing of א, thus making it the head of a column of vowels, in which a second place was needed for ו, which in both Egyptian and Semitic letters was both a vowel and a consonant. The sibilants present themselves for arrangement. But sibilants are of two classes, pure and impure, and therefore require two columns, or must place two letters in some spaces. If any sense of symmetry is to direct the arrangement of the phonetic square, these partial columns must be placed inside the full ranks, and there are good reasons why the two lines of sibilants should be well separated. There remain to be placed י and the liquids. Semitic ר is an aspirate or semi-guttural, and belongs in the lower line; and the same principle which opened the square of mutes to place the sibilants, would open again its centre to place the ר. Then י must enter somewhere the column of vowels, and the liquids must somewhere stand by themselves.

The following then is the natural full exhibition of the Hebrew Phonetic elements:

	Gutturals.	Vowels.	Labials.	Impure Sibilants.	Palatals.	Liquids.	Pure Sibilants.	Dentals.
Resonant.............	א	א	בּ		גּ			דּ
Smooth sonant.........			ב		ג			ד
Rough "	ה	ו	ו	ז	ח			ט
Explosive or surd......		י	פּ		כּ			תּ
Smooth aspirate........			פ	ס	כ		שׂ	ת
Rough "	ע		פ	צ	ק	ר נמל	שׁ	ת

But in the alphabet the medial sounds of בגדכפ and ת needed no separate letters, as the sounds are incidental, and dependent on the precedence of vowels. Also א and ו needed for each but one form of representation. Also שׁ and שׂ were too similar to need separate letters. When, therefore, numerical values were given to the letters, of course all letters were confined to single positions, and the last three lines shrank to one, except that כ was left alone because of the occupation of its place by ק.

It seems possible that the arranger of the numerical values of the alphabet, finding כ left alone, thought it best to range with כ all the rest of the serviles or prefixes except בּ and תּ, whose place was elsewhere fixed. The numerically arranged alphabet was then as follows:

	Gutturals.	Vowels.	Labials.	Impure Sibilants.	Palatals.	Liquids.	Pure Sibilants.	Dentals.
Resonant.............	א		ב		ג			ד
Smooth................	ה		ו	ז	ח			ט
Prefixes...............		י			כ	נמל		
				ס				
Aspirated	ע		פ	צ	ק	ר	שׁ	ת

We may now observe how the Egyptian alphabet assisted and perhaps suggested this scheme. In nearly all the languages of civilization, as Sanskrit, Hebrew, Egyptian, and their descendants, there has been a continuous softening of sounds which originally were hard, or real aspirates. All along the line there has been a movement from *b*, *gh*, *d*, *k*, *p*, *q*, *s*, *t*, towards *v*, *j*, *dh*, *ch*, *f*, *sh*, *z*, *th*, while really aspirated *bh*, *gh*, *dh*, *kh*, *ph*, *q*, *sh* and *th*, were either primal or very ancient sounds. The arranger of the Semitic alphabet found the Egyptian tongue, in respect to this progression of the mutes, nearly in a primitive condition, while his own language was in an intermediate stage between a primal state and modern Aramaic.

With complete naturalness, he seems first to have transcribed the vowels, the separated usage of which as pure vowels and diphthongs had become thoroughly common in Egyptian letters. He needed but three vowels *a*, *u*, *i*, (English *a*, *oo*, *e*) for the then common vowel-sounds of his own language. For the first, he took that Egyptian hieratic character which was used most commonly for *a*, at the beginning of words. Of this letter the א of the Siloam inscription is a close copy. For *u* he took another common hieratic form. For *i (e)* the Egyptian alphabet furnished three symbols, either of which might easily be the germ of י; but in the absence of specimens of the possible oldest forms of the Semitic letter, the hieratic and demotic letters being imperfect guides, we put the three forms in our subsequent table without deciding between them. Semitic י may be a fusion of the three Egyptian forms.

When the Semitic arranger had fixed in his mind the three vowels, or perhaps written them, he encountered a peculiarity of his language. His א was to him, in certain circumstances, inseparably connected with a slight separate breathing, and this breathing in a much rarer usage was associated with other vowel sounds. He deemed no other letter than א necessary for the expression of this breathing; and in this he partly followed Egyptian usage, in which this א did service also for other vowels and diphthongs. His *u* also naturally became to him, in some circumstances, *v;* and the same is true of the corresponding Egyptian letter. If then he wrote his three vowel letters in a column, and desired to write or tabulate their full value, he was compelled to write on one side of his א another א to head a column of breathings, and on the other side of his ו another ו ranging itself with the labial letters.

He sought representatives of the resonant sounds, but the Egyptian language used neither *d* or *g*, and perhaps at that time no *b*. He was therefore obliged to take *k* for *g* and *t* for *d*. Egyptologists concur in giving the value *b* to several Egyptian letters. Nevertheless the Egyptian *p* was much more common; and the later demotic letter which was derived from it, was used for Greek π, β and φ. There was, however, in some use a letter which Egyptologists call *b*, and which gave a derivative which had the Greek equivalents β, υ, φ. Either this *p* or this *b* in hieratic form could furnish the Semitic בּ and ב. We put both in our table as possible sources of Semitic ב.

For completing the column of labials, the Egyptian letters furnished a character whose later value was both *u* and *v* or *f*. It was very common, and was therefore taken for ו, and is still perpetuated in the Coptic alphabet for *f*. There was another character common in the hieroglyphics with the value of *u* and *v*, but its hieratic forms tended so much towards confusion with the *f* that it seems to have been replaced by that letter both in Egyptian and Semitic writing. Yet we have put both in our table. For *p* we find a common hieratic form of the common hieroglyphic *p*.

The columns of palatals was to be supplied. As above stated, one *k* was taken for ג. Another was needed and taken for כ. Common hieratic forms for both letters were taken. For Semitic ח the Egyptian alphabet could not be expected to offer an exact equivalent; but it gave a choice between one character which represented a harsh *h* or soft *k*, and another which in early Egyptian represented Greek *x* but in later Egyptian became *s* or *sh*. The latter, however, seems in its hieratic form to have been the prototype of ק, and the former seems in its hieroglyphic form to have furnished the model for ח.

The column of dentals was to be supplied from about eight common Egyptian representatives of *t*. Egyptologists disagree as to the derivation of the hieratic forms from the hieroglyphs representing *t*, and also as to their exact values. Three of these had so nearly an identical value that they were often interchanged in spelling the same words, and they were used in foreign words for *d* and *t*. It seems probable that the half-circle *t* which was somewhat common, was the prototype of ד, the angular form being chosen to distinguish it from ר. Three other Egyptian characters for *t* rarely interchange and had some peculiar quality. We place two of the letters in our table as the prototype of ט and צ, but the source of ת is doubtful.

The column of gutturals, or breathings, was to be finished. The common Egyptian *h* became ה. The letter ע was a Semitic invention, and the only one in the alphabet. It was probably an imitation of an eye, and had both of its Arabic values.

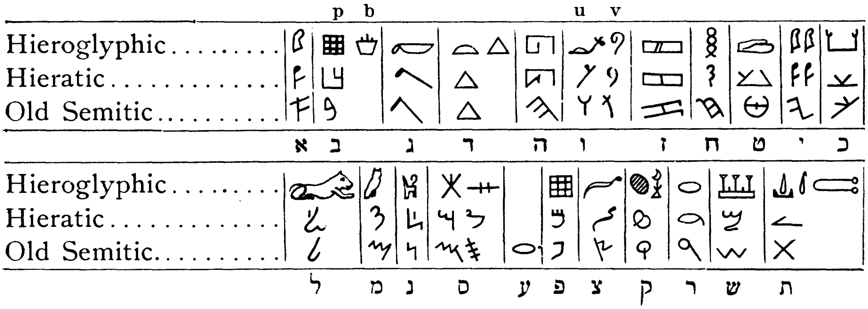
The Semitic liquids are plainly hieratic Egyptian, easily recognized and traced to their sources.

The sibilants alone remained to be supplied. For many reasons, difficulties of identification are to be expected. On one hand *d*, *t* and *th* have interchanged with *s*, *ts* and *z* in many languages. On the other hand, in many languages, *g* and *k* have softened to *sh* and *zh*, and even to the sound of *s*. Again sibilation and aspiration are closely related, hence Indian *s* is Persian *h*, and Greek *h* in many words is Latin *s*. Sibilants, then, are of three kinds, one being aspirated, one having a dental quality and one having a palatal quality. Moreover we have very imperfect knowledge of the sibilants in both the Semitic and the Egyptian languages, and in both they seem to have been very changeable. The Egyptian language had no *z* or *ts*, and in later times used an *s* to represent a *z*, and *t* to represent צ. Hence the nearest approach to *z* in Egyptian letters should be an *s* of the class which Lepsius would call cerebral fricative, approaching a dental character. This value Lepsius gives to that Egyptian *s* which the oldest Semitic specimens most resemble, and which we put in our table for *z*. Semitic ז would seem to have been nearly identical with English *s* in *is;* hence its tendency to interchange with ס and שׂ rather than with שׁ.

For צ, transcribers use two forms of Egyptian hieroglyphic *t*, belonging in the second set mentioned above, but principally that one which we put in our table for צ. It is noticeable that in the oldest Semitic relics ז and צ much resemble each other, the latter having an additional limb on the left, although this is nearly eliminated in the Siloam inscription. The Moabite stone seems to give the older צ, which is the hieroglyph changed only so much as is natural in writing the character angularly and moving the pen from left to right. But צ seems never to have been an indigenous letter in Semitic languages. In Aramaic words, it often became ט and ד, and in other languages was transcribed as *t*, *s* or *z*. In Arabic it has become separated into an *s* and *d* which have a harsh quality.

Semitic שׁ is plainly Egyptian and common. The same character seems also, in Egyptian hieratic and demotic writings, to have had sometimes the value of שׂ, and it would seem that שׂ was but *s* more softly aspirated than שׁ. The distinction between ס and שׂ is not conspicuous. The disappearance of ס from Arabic and the substitution of שׂ in its place, and also the interchanges of ס and שׂ in Hebrew, imply much resemblance in their sounds. But the entrance of ס into the Greek alphabet as *ks* implies in it an aspirated or palatal element, which is also indicated in the position assigned to it by the Semitic arranger. All things considered, ס must have been a hissed *h*, and שׂ an aspirated *s*, and the distinction between them was too slight for the perpetuation of both, and they have therefore nearly everywhere been merged into one true *s*.

The following table is presented in the hope that in those points in which it exhibits novelties it may be found to be based on a correct method. Yet, while the best Egyptologists are in some respects at fault, any scheme for exhibiting the derivation of the Semitic letters must be somewhat tentative until older specimens are found.


p b
u v
Hieroglyphic.........
Hieratic.............
Old Semitic..........
א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ
Hieroglyphic.........
Hieratic.............
Old Semitic..........
ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

* * *

THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS.

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Do the earlier prophetical books indicate that their authors were acquainted with the Law of Moses, i. e., with the Pentateuch in its present form? This is one of the questions subordinate to the great Pentateuch question, just now the *crux criticorum.* A recent attempt to answer it is the book of Bredenkamp* entitled "Law and Prophets." The importance of the question and the ability of this answer justify some account of the book here.

The question in debate is "exactly what is the evidence of the prophets to the Pentateuch in its present form?" The conceivable answers are numerous. If the view heretofore generally held concerning the Pentateuch is correct we might expect the prophets to make a distinct allusion to it as a canonical book, or one holding much the same position which we assign to the Bible. Their silence, however, concerning a canonical Torah, might possibly be explained on the ground that they felt themselves not to be commentators of Moses but co-workers with him. Even

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* Gesetz und Propheten. Ein Beitrag zur alttestamentlichen Kritik von Lic. *C. J. Bredenkamp*, Privat-docent der Theologie in Erlangen. Erlangen, 1881 (IV. and 204 pp).